Unit .03

Session .03

God's New Name for Jacob

Scripture

Genesis 32:24-32

24 Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him
until daybreak. **25** When the man saw that he could
not defeat him, he struck Jacob's hip socket as they
wrestled and dislocated his hip. **26** Then he said to
Jacob, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob said,
"I will not let you go unless you bless me."
27 "What is your name?" the man asked. "Jacob,"
he replied. **28** "Your name will no longer be Jacob,"
he said. "It will be Israel because you have struggled
with God and with men and have prevailed." **29** Then
Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he
answered, "Why do you ask my name?" And he blessed
him there. **30** Jacob then named the place Peniel, "For
I have seen God face to face," he said, "yet my life has
been spared." **31** The sun shone on him as he passed
by Penuel—limping because of his hip. **32** That is
why, still today, the Israelites don't eat the thigh muscle
that is at the hip socket: because he struck Jacob's hip
socket at the thigh muscle.

Intro Options

Main Point:
God is working to change our hearts and give us new identities.

Option 1

Before the session, gather some items that are made to serve a specific purpose, but are often used in different ways. Items may include: empty coffee cans as pencil holders, newspaper as wrapping paper for a gift, or glass jars as drink glasses. Coffee cans usually keep our coffee grounds fresh, the newspaper typically tells us what's going on around the world, and glass jars usually preserve food—this is their identity. When we choose to use them another way, we don't change what they look like on the outside, but we do change what they contain.

- **What items do you or your family use in ways other than what's intended?**

We don't change the items' physical appearance; we change the items' purpose. A Christian is a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17) and has a new identity in Christ. Throughout our lives, God continues working in us and changing us for His plan, His purpose, His glory, and our good (Rom. 8:28; Phil. 1:6).

Option 2

Before the session, grab several pairs of clean tall socks or baseball socks. Go outside if you're able (if not, find a large classroom) and place students into groups of girls and guys, at opposite ends of a large space. Give each student a pair of socks. You can have them play the game groups of four to six if you have a large group or if you don't have enough socks.

You will play a game called "Sock War." The object of the game is for students to try to pull off the other students' socks. The last student still wearing a sock (or socks) wins. The catch: They can't stand. They have to "walk" or try to escape from other students while on their knees. Allow students to play for a set time or until only one guy and one girl are left. Provide a small prize for the winner from each group. Keep a close eye on students, making sure they aren't playing rough. You may want to have a volunteer stationed with each group to monitor students as they play as this will help prevent injuries.

- **What kind of strategies did you see the winners use?**
- **How would you play the "Sock War" differently next time?**

A good strategy in most games and competitions is this: Don't give up. Jacob provided a good example of this when he wrestled with God. He refused to let go, even when asked, until God blessed him (Gen. 32:26). God's persistence in changing Jacob should show us His persistence in changing our hearts, too. And what we can learn from Jacob is to be persistent in our prayers and seeking the Lord.

TEACHING PLAN

In the past few sessions, we have followed Jacob as he tricked his father and brother, fled from his home, and traveled to Paddan-aram to find a wife. Even amidst more deception by Jacob and others, God was faithful to His promise to be with Jacob and bless him. Jacob departed from Laban's home with a family and many possessions.

Eventually, Jacob and his family encountered a scary situation. They reached the fringes of the land of God's promise, the land of Jacob's family—including his brother Esau. And this was the point of no return. They couldn't turn back because Laban was angry with them and Jacob had made a covenant not to return (Gen. 31:36-55). But moving forward meant facing Esau, who was also angry with Jacob and had threatened to kill him. They were trapped in between two angry people.

Jacob sent messengers ahead of his family to speak with his brother Esau. Jacob instructed the messengers to greet Esau, to call him Jacob's "lord," and to ask that Jacob may find favor in Esau's eyes. When the messengers returned they reported that Esau was coming to meet Jacob—with four hundred men.

This news understandably distressed Jacob, so true to his nature he began forming a plan to appease his brother and save his own family. He divided his family into two camps; if Esau attacked one, then the other might be able to escape and survive. He then sent a parade of servants before him with lavish gifts for Esau and instructed the messengers to say, "These belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift to my lord Esau" (Gen. 32:18). That night, Jacob sent his two family groups to separate camps and stayed behind by himself. But he wouldn't be alone for long.

Read Genesis 32:24-27.

Scholars generally agree Jacob's opponent that night was God Himself. While we do not know how this wrestling match began, we do know one of the outcomes of the blow God dealt Jacob. But this blow was not a curse; it was a blessing. Jacob would have to face his physically adept brother—the hunter—and his brother's sizable contingent of men with a physical disadvantage. Self-reliant Jacob would not be able to rely on his own physical ability to fight Esau if it came to that. One touch from God brought Jacob low. And people in a humble posture are the ones God delights in doing great things through.

Activity

Bring in an inflatable beach ball and instruct students to stand in a circle. Tell them to tap the beach ball in the air, without tapping it more than once in a row. They get a point for every time they tap the ball and keep it in the air. The point is to not let the ball touch the ground. Play one round in silence. Students will lose a point each time they speak. Play another round, allowing them to talk to one another. This activity will teach the importance of communication and perseverance, both of which Jacob used as he wrestled with God.

- **How has God taught you to rely more on Him?**
- **In what areas of your life do you need to be broken?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God is working to change our hearts and give us new identities.

Genesis 32

24-27. This wrestling match is instructive in at least two ways. First, God confronting Jacob hints at the reality of Jacob's flawed character and the truth that God will not allow sin to go unpunished. We see a similar event in Moses' life when he failed to obey God's command (Ex. 4:24-26). God wanted to use Jacob, but He would change him first.

Second, the man dislocated Jacob's hip, in what seemed to be a desperate act to get away before sunrise, which may point to the reason God held Jacob accountable and wanted to transform him. Before the blessing was carried forward, this sinful man—Jacob—had to be broken. Perhaps that is why the man asked Jacob about his name, which meant "cheater." Jacob's life up to this point had been in line with his name.

28-32. In God's wisdom, He gave Jacob the name Israel as an ever-present reminder. The true source of strength, power, and provision in his life was God. It was time for Jacob to stop fighting against God in order to receive His blessing in his life and instead fight alongside God as part of His plan to extend His blessing to the world.

While the Lord did not speak His own name to Jacob, He did bless him. Jacob called this wrestling-match site "Peniel," or "face of God." The name memorialized seeing God face-to-face and, through the grace of God, living through the experience. God had lowered Himself, becoming as man, and wrestled with His creation to bring about spiritual transformation. In this case, it was Jacob being changed—he would greet his estranged brother a changed man, physically maimed but spiritually renewed. Yet one day it would be through another, from the line of Jacob, who would lower Himself, becoming a man and wrestling with sin and death to bring about redemption to the world.

99 Essential Doctrines *(p. 104, DDG)*

New Identity of the Believer

When a person places their faith in Christ, that person experiences a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an enemy under God's wrath (Eph. 2:1-3) to being welcomed into God's family as a beloved child (Eph. 2:19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation" in whom the old, sinful self has passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, becoming more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

TEACHING PLAN

Read Genesis 32:28-32.

The Lord dealt a second blow to Jacob that night. While this one wasn't physical like the first, in many ways it was a more devastating. It came when God asks Jacob for his name. Jacob responded by saying his name out loud. And there it was—the second blow in this match.

Jacob's name has many similar meanings: "trickster," "supplanter," "heel-grabber," and "deceiver." God asked Jacob his name, offering the patriarch the opportunity to confess his character. Jacob did, and then God changed his name. Jacob would from then on be Israel.

- **List some ways our past mistakes try to haunt and define us.**

There are many different interpretations of the name Israel, although most have a similar meaning: "strives with God" or "God fights." It is a fitting name for Jacob because this was the main lesson he needed to learn that night and remember the following day as well as the rest of his life. All his life, Jacob may have seen himself struggling with other people. His older brother Esau, Laban, and maybe even his wives. But what Jacob needed to know was that his real struggle was never with another person; it was with God. All of his life, Jacob had relied on himself to handle everything, including acquiring the spiritual blessings God promised him. Jacob may have seen other people as barriers to getting what he wanted—what he felt he deserved—but in reality, the barrier he had to overcome was himself. He was the one causing headache and heartache in his life and in the lives of those around him by constantly trying to force what God wanted to give him freely.

- **When have you wanted to be someone else, start fresh, or receive a new reputation? What did you do to try to accomplish that?**
- **When have you seen God change you quickly? When has the change been gradual or slow?**

God did an amazing work with Jacob and Esau the next day, but Jacob needed his own moment of clarity first. God paved the way for Jacob to meet Esau in humility, and humility paved the way to reconciliation. But God had something else in mind that required Jacob's humility as well—something beyond a family reunion. God was continuing His march toward blessing all of mankind with a greater reconciliation—one that would come through Jacob, not feature Jacob. God was still at work to make good on His promise to Eve in Genesis 3:15 and to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 to provide the One who would defeat sin and death.

- **Think of a time when you specifically wrestled with God. What did you learn, or what are you learning, during this time?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God is working to change our hearts and give us new identities.

Genesis 35:9-15

9-15. The day after his wrestling match, Jacob met with Esau as a humbled and changed man. Jacob was no longer the deceiver or usurper; he trusted God to go before him and work in the heart of his brother. And that is what God did. He fought the battle for Jacob and when the two brothers met, they experienced true reconciliation after years of estrangement. There was victory in the changed lives of both Jacob and Esau. This victory was a beautiful end to strife and an important beginning to the nation of Israel.

Jacob is able to settle back in the land of promise, and though he still faces struggles and trials (Gen. 33–34), he faces them with a growing spiritual maturity and a growing responsibility to the people of God. And then one day, God appeared to Jacob once more (vv. 9-15).

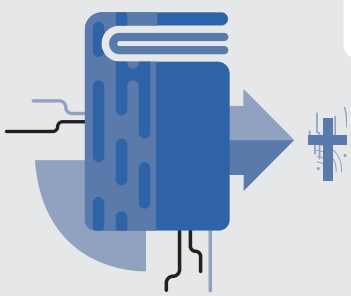
Notice the progression for Jacob: Blessing (v. 9), New Identity (v. 10), Responsibility (v. 11). In the same way, God blesses us with salvation and transformation so that we can then fulfill His calling on our lives.

What led to the events in this passage? After Jacob returned to the land, he reconciled with Esau and blessed him. Later, God commanded Jacob to settle in Bethel and exhorted him to repent of his idolatry. So Jacob got rid of all his family's false gods. In these events, we see the gradual transformation in Jacob's life. Yes, the transformation was slow, but it was progressive. (The same is true with us!)

God would keep His promises to Jacob. Jacob was indeed fruitful and multiplied. He had 12 sons who would become the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel. And God would keep His promise that through Jacob's offspring would come a King—a Messiah—who would bring salvation to the world.

(p. 106, DDG) Christ Connection

God's renaming of individuals in the Old Testament reflects both privilege and responsibility. As Christians, we bear the name of Christ. We receive both the privilege of salvation and the responsibility of mission.



GOD'S NEW NAME FOR JACOB

Genesis 32:24–32

GOD'S NEW NAME FOR JACOB

God is working to change our hearts and give us new identities.

JESUS CONNECTION

God gave Jacob a new name, Israel, to reveal his identity as the father of God's chosen people. It was a mark of both privilege and responsibility. As Christians, we reflect the name of Christ. We receive both the privilege of salvation and the responsibility of serving Jesus.

LIFEWISE QUALITY

TEACHABLE – Being willing to change my mind and actions as I learn.

HEAD

What was Jacob's new name and why was it given to him?

What was Jacob's real struggle?

HEART

What are some ways we might "wrestle" with God today? How do these moments help us be more teachable?

We might be tempted to think God is angry when we wrestle with Him. Why is it important to see these moments as acts of God's grace instead?

HANDS

Are you teachable—willing to change your thoughts and actions as God continues to mold you into who He wants you to be? Ask someone you trust (a close friend, relative, pastor) what areas they see in your life you have been teachable and what areas they see unwillingness to change. Commit to becoming more teachable in an area in which you need to grow.